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**EMPOWERING
WHAT WE ALREADY HAVE**

**ENABLING CHURCHES FOR MINISTRY AND MISSION
THROUGH COOPERATIVE PARISH MINISTRY**

by

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An Address presented to the
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INTRODUCTION AND AFFIRMATION

When I read the *United Methodist Rural Fellowship Bulletin* recently, I became aware of the reality that much has been done, as well as said, about the churches and communities which have been the concern of the United Methodist Rural Fellowship through the years. Awareness of hurt and inequity has been raised. Creative and scholarly research has been carried out. Needs and potential have been stated eloquently in numerous places by many able people. The names given in the Fortieth Anniversary Edition¹ of the *Bulletin* read like a hall of fame: Aaron Rapking, Ralph Williamson, Pat McConnell, Glen Sanford, Ray Magnuson, Elliott L. Fisher, Clyde Rogers, Glen Gothard, A. J. Walton, W. C. Martin, Jennie Youngblood, Connie Russell, Alice Cobb, Harold Huff and others of similar stature, to say nothing of the array of persons who give us leadership at this time.

The minds, both past and present, who have contributed to the general enablement of the town and country church, to small membership churches, and to cooperative parish development, have been so numerous and effective that I wonder what I might say that will add

¹ *United Methodist Rural Fellowship Bulletin*, Vol. XL, March 1980, No.1

to the existing reservoir of insight.. However, I do feel that we are at a point in time where newness of thought is not the requisite so much as the formation of stance and the resolve to act. This is the concern or focus of the following remarks. What I say will be couched in the framework of cooperative ministries and from a deep concern about churches of small membership.

OUR HERITAGE AS UNITED METHODISTS

Someone has said that when the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail! For years circuits and stations have been the only tools we have had to knock away at the charge and appointment-related problems we deal with as a Church. Therefore, circuits and stations have been over-used to hammer away at the nails of pastoral supply, nurturing programs and responsible community outreach. "Cooperative ministry," on the other hand, is a new tool designed to help deal with these and other needs and opportunities. While the cooperative approach is not effective for every problem, it does have potential that we may be overlooking. I believe the time is upon us when we must look for the hammer, the saw, the level and the plumb line of church skills for use with all kinds of churches--large and small--in all kinds of places--rural and urban.

I do, however, have a special concern for small membership churches. My concern takes into account who we are as United Methodists and from where we have come. We have approximately 39,000 congregations; 25,000 of these have memberships of under 200 members. That is roughly 64 percent. We are a denomination of small membership churches. More than 7,000 of our congregations

have less than 50 members. This says much about the kind of Church we are. It also should say much to us about where some of our priorities should be focused.

These facts should not be interpreted as a sign of weakness but rather as a sign of the genius of our heritage. For instance, the historical proliferation of class meetings and preaching centers is important in the tradition called "the Methodist Movement." The circuit riders did not look for crowds of people but for people to whom Christ should be proclaimed. Preaching and other forms of worship found their expressions in outdoor gatherings, taverns, homes and public buildings. Congregations were gathered together. And, then later, churches were organized, followed by the building of places for worship, Christian education and other activities. Administrative methods to help with the formation of congregations and the erection of buildings were developed and sensibly changed from time to time. Let me point out that our churches were not left out or left alone because of smallness or largeness. Throughout the years our approach to being the Church has called for organizational structures and processes which linked our bond to Christ with our intent to be in mission within communities through the presence and commitment of our local churches.

Our strength in terms of great churches, hospitals, colleges, and homes for children and the elderly, had its onset from these vitality-filled beginnings. Whatever United Methodists have done that is big, strong and "successful" came from the combined strength of numerous small churches as well as from our larger churches. The issue can be posed, then, as to whether we dare

to relinquish, or to let flounder, any of our churches which have been centers that proclaimed the living presence of the Christian gospel and which even now reach out into the community and continue to be a source of new members for the Church. All of our churches together provide an ever-present flow of vigorous vitality to United Methodism's world-wide commitments.

PRESENCE AND CONNECTIONALISM

Along this same line, United Methodism has never relinquished the conviction that in whatever place people live, there is a setting for Christian proclamation and mission, no matter how small the place may be. Traditionally, we have felt that all places where people live not only are opportunities for service but that they also are places of responsibility where we must present God's love. The result of our historical willingness across the years to proliferate the Gospel in every social setting has resulted in the establishment of more congregations in the United States than there are post offices. That has not been one of our goals, of course, but it is a result of our caring and of our belief that every person should hear the Name of Jesus Christ. Methodism has been known not simply as a denomination but as a presence in most communities. The outcome of our history and heritage, thus, has been both a geographical presence and an organizational linkage known as "connectionalism." We cared, we carried, we called! We cared for people who were unchurched and unchristian. We carried the Gospel to them on their own turf. We called them to join Christ in a saving relationship and to establish justice and equity in the land. We went on from there to become whatever is good in what we are today. At its best,

connectionalism is church-wide parish development, which includes local, district, annual conference, and national levels of the Church.

CONCERN ABOUT OUR CHURCHES AND COOPERATIVE PARISH MINISTRIES AS A RESPONSE

Let me say that my affirmation of our heritage and my commitment to its expression at this time in history supports my interest in cooperative parish ministry today. I am concerned about our congregations regardless of their size. I am concerned about their need to be the Church locally, within their own geographical areas. And, I am concerned about our need for churches of all sizes to actively make positive impacts on the larger United Methodist Church.

During the remainder of this presentation I want to deal with four assumptions about cooperative parish ministries as a means by which our churches can carry out effective ministry. In doing this, I will spell out and comment on two basic scenarios, address the need to avoid polarization, speak briefly about church growth, and then suggest twelve questions which should be considered by the United Methodist Church as a denomination in relation to cooperative parish ministry.

SCENARIO 1

Imagine a fictitious setting of eight churches which are located relatively close to each other and within a "natural geographical setting." Let us suppose that equitable salary money is being used to support at least two of the pastors. Perhaps four of these churches are on two circuits and are served by lay

speakers. Three may be served by part-time preachers. Of course, there are various other ways these churches and pastors could be arranged administratively. However, while efforts might be made to arrange the circuits in configurations that would minimize travel by the preachers, unfortunately the basic and underlying reason for the charges as administrative arrangements is economic. Their existence is more to "pay the preacher" than for carrying out nurture and missional outreach. As you know, this situation can be repeated thousands of times in our denomination.

Let us also imagine that a district superintendent comes along who feels that some type of parish or cooperative effort is needed and possible. The pastors of the churches develop an interest in cooperative parish ministry which is generated by the district superintendent or by the conference's town/country or urban committees. Laity of the churches are brought into a process of consultation. Some excitement is generated; some new and helpful relationships are entered into; the parish really is doing quite well.

Eighteen months following initiation of the parish, one of the local pastors has completed enough study and done so well that he/she is replaced by a person who has no background or perhaps has an uninformed interest in cooperative ministries. The lay speaker is tired of the trek each Sunday and asks to be relieved. Three years after this fictitious parish is started, the superintendent goes off the district. Sadly, the new superintendent has minimal interest in being the Church in this way. He/she knows what everyone else knows, namely that "the large

churches of the conference really carry the load." Thus, a negative toll soon is evident.... You identify with this situation, I am sure.

SCENARIO 2

Now, instead of accepting the inevitability of this scenario, suppose it were possible to put together a team that has in it: a fully trained seminary person; a couple of local pastors who have been trained in skills of cooperative ministries; and, perhaps a church and community worker. All of these have entered into a covenant relationship with laity of the churches who themselves also have explored the potential for nurture and outreach made possible through the relationships enabled by their cooperative ministry.

COMMENTARY ON SCENARIOS 1 AND 2

If this kind of leadership were possible, how might this second scenario be different? Would it likely have permanence and continuity? Would it be any better off than described in the first scenario? I want to insist that it probably would not be any better off in the long run unless a wholistic approach to cooperative ministry is worked through by the annual conference. This approach would reflect a style of leadership management and cooperative skills that goes far beyond dealing with cooperative ministries "as a program," to be tried out for a while or until the excitement of the new expends itself. This comprehensive stance would involve the conference and its boards as well as district superintendents, pastors and laity, in an exploration of attitudinal, theological, administrative, and structural aspects of cooperation.

For this positive phenomenon to occur, and especially for it to continue for a significant period of time, cooperative ministries would have to be seen as a priority of the annual conference. This is because the resourcing boards, agencies, and personnel of the conference must be deeply involved in the enterprise. Their work should be coordinated. The Board of Global Ministries, Commission on Equitable Salaries, district funding, attitudes and commitments of district superintendents, criteria by which superintendents are selected, the appointment-making process itself, and the personal relationship, commitment and involvement of the bishop all must be included. Each conference group and key leader should strive to live out a deep-felt belief that it actually is possible for congregations to upgrade the quality of pastoral and lay leadership, to nurture their people more thoroughly through worship/fellowship/loving care, and literally to engage harmful powers of hunger, injustice, poverty and disenfranchisement in their communities. For this to happen, annual conference boards and agencies must call for and help clusters of local churches to take on a style of coordination and concern which makes cooperative parishes possible. If this is not done, though there may be isolated instances of continuity, the frequency of survival by cooperative parishes will be nominal, and they will be viewed more as problems than as opportunities for being the Church.

BASIC ASSUMPTION 1. COOPERATIVE PARISH MINISTRY IS NOT A PROGRAM
BUT A WAY OF DOING MINISTRY

Let me now begin to set out some basic assumptions about cooperative parish development. I believe that work with

cooperative parish ministry must not be approached from the standpoint of a new and creative program for the United Methodist Church, but from the standpoint of an administrative style uniquely available to the United Methodist Church. While a theology and a philosophy of management and leadership are imperative to cooperative parish ministries, in my own judgment, we must move more intentionally with the concept that cooperation among churches is not a program--it is a way of doing ministry. Resistance to this concept often is expressed in terms of whether or not cooperation is a "program" and whether it is practical or viable or not. When this happens, efforts for cooperative ministry take place among the myriad of other programs. This confuses the issue of "how we shall do" ministry. To counter this negative approach, we should exhibit a unique style of being the Church. The style must exhibit a design that sees us "being the Church" rather than "doing the programmatic." This calls for a close look at styles of management, at deployment of personnel and funds, and at making appointments in ways that go beyond the programmatic. For instance, training of teachers of one-room church settings is important, but it is not enough. Creation of curriculum designed for small membership churches is important, but it is not adequate in itself. Rather, processes must be developed at all levels of leadership for the Church to be the Church in ways which demonstrate programmatic and missional goals as outcomes of being the Church rather than as an area of first activity.

BASIC ASSUMPTION 2. THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF NECESSITY MUST
ENABLE CONGREGATIONS TO BE THE CHURCH

Therefore, I believe that to pursue a format of trying to generate vitality in small membership (as well as larger membership) churches through programs or special emphases alone is to place their futures and our efforts into the competitive merry-go-round of endless program efforts which have to seek votes to assure continuing financial support. This is a losing cause in any annual conference. The real issue is how to enable a number of congregations within a general locality to be the Church together while at the same time affirming and supporting each individual congregation as a valid church. The real issue also must address how to involve churches in cooperative experiences that will build on their intuitions about congregational worship and nurture while at the same time holding before them the need to wrestle collectively with wrong in their communities and throughout the world. This of necessity calls for a stance by the larger Church of the annual conference, demonstrating without equivocation, that the cooperative approach permeates the administrative leadership of the whole conference. While it is clear that cooperative parish ministry cannot be forced by the bishop or conference, it is a process which calls for active involvement of the bishop/cabinet/boards and agencies of the annual conference, and for that matter the General Church as well.

What I really am asking for is that we approach cooperative parish ministries by looking at the work which needs to be done by the Church, composed of several churches within a local area,

and that then we use the persuasive strength of United Methodism's polity and skills to organize and get it done. To be more specific in summarizing this second assumption, cooperative ministries should be presented to an annual conference as a way of doing/being the Church and its work, not as a program of the Church.

BASIC ASSUMPTION 3. URBAN AND TOWN/RURAL CHURCHES SHOULD PARTICIPATE IN COOPERATIVE PARISHES

Another assumption is that churches located in both urban and town/rural areas are eligible to participate in cooperative parishes. Some of our present reticence to include urban churches in cooperative parishes may be due to the feeling that more rural than urban churches are "marginated" in their relationships with the larger United Methodist Church. Margination here refers to churches that feel themselves outside the mainstream of United Methodist resourcing, attention or concern. Margination, therefore, can be found in large as well as smaller churches and also in urban as well as town and rural churches. While theoretical understandings and effective operational approaches to cooperative ministries were developed by town and country specialists, cooperative parishes as a United Methodist appointment type--one of our tools--can be as important to urban as to town/rural churches. There are thousands of urban churches that can be strengthened as they work closely with other churches to secure needed professional skills of leadership over and above those that ordinarily would be available to a single church or charge. Numerous urban churches, which at this time view community mission as impossible, could be engaged in desperately needed community mission through involvement in cooperative parish ministry. Both urban as well

as town/rural churches should explore how cooperative parish ministry would advance their ministries and missional outreach.

BASIC ASSUMPTION 4. LARGER AND SMALLER MEMBERSHIP CHURCHES
SHOULD PARTICIPATE IN COOPERATIVE PARISHES

Another assumption is that cooperative ministries may involve larger membership churches, or those churches strong enough to carry on their own programs and ministry. Shared strength does not move in only one direction. Strength from a large church to smaller churches can be experienced in obvious ways such as finances, leadership and facilities. Strength from a smaller church to a larger church may seem less apparent. But, larger churches can learn about "hanging on," how to care for people as entire beings, how to be the church in population settings of low density, and how to perform outreach when large sums of money are not available.

Both larger and smaller churches can initiate ideas, stimulate leaders for action projects, and identify missional and justice needs within their common community area. Since cooperative ministries essentially mean congregations in relationship with each other, relationships can be even more promising when a core of strength is present due to the presence of at least one larger church in combination with the strengths of smaller membership churches. A very important aspect of this premise which becomes visible when larger membership churches relate covenantally with churches of other sizes is that a new sense of mission is experienced. Mission for the larger church ought to include direct and constant outreach to and with other churches located within their own larger community. The point is that large and

small congregations--together--are The Church for any given area. They need each other. Their community needs their collective presence in the form of a strong covenant in action.

POLARIZATIONS

At this point let me comment about polarizations within the annual conference in relation to cooperative parish ministry. We must not entangle cooperative parish ministry in conference-polarization traps. Examples of polarization can be found in tension-filled factors such as: larger churches versus small churches; being a pastor in small churches versus larger churches; allocation of money for cooperative ministries versus allocations for evangelism, education, or other programmatic enterprises; etc. The Church, wherever it is or whatever it does well, is "us." We should not label some pastors as cooperative parish-type pastors, or others as small-church pastors, or even others as station pastors. Small membership churches, large membership churches, rural, town, and city churches all comprise Christ's church. Each one is a reflection of past decisions made, present experiences shared, and response to societal circumstances. Each one is to be loved, nurtured, and empowered in order to realize the potential that God has given it. In particular, we must not "pat" small membership churches on the head and describe them as "nice little churches" which we can all "love," like handicapped persons or unfortunate orphans have been treated in the past. All of our churches are entities. They are the Church present, the Body of Christ in the midst of human beings today.

I am trying to make a point, even at the danger of being

redundant. We have become a global Church because of our capacity and willingness to proliferate by forming churches in many different places rather than centralizing our activities. In keeping with our intent for churches to be located throughout the land, through the appointive process of connectionalism, our church system has enabled us to deploy personnel according to need and ability. We have annual conference structures and general church linkages which enable us to shift, to move, and to thrust pastors into all kinds of places that need sensitive insight and specialized skills. But, we have to decide to do this and then to do it. We have the capacity to be a great Church that is responsive to the needs of smaller as well as larger churches and to community outreach as well as world-wide mission. We must help our churches serve and truly be parts of the whole Church of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Polarization within the annual conference toward cooperative parish ministries must not stand in the way of building on the strengths of proliferation. We must learn how to help all churches and pastors in a local area to work together in response to people and community needs.

CHURCH GROWTH

Let me now say a few words about church growth. In a local church of any size, growth should be an objective. But before we say "some churches can't grow," let it be said that numerical growth is not the only form of growth. A church may experience numerical growth, or it may not. Spiritual growth based in faith, involving nurture, enablement, caring, religious insight and

commitment, should be an objective of every church. It has been said that faith is like an egg--it must make progress--it dare not try to stay the same because it will lose its capacity for growth and get terribly smelly at the same time. For this reason, if a congregation has a feeling of defeat, weakness, or of being at the point of mere existence, its over-riding concern is sub-Christian. Sadly, this is where many churches are today. The facts of economic necessity with the escalating costs of providing pastoral support, paying for programs to meet local need, and maintaining buildings make the stewardship of being the Church a demanding and often a very discouraging task. At the same time, churches which have existence as their number one priority, rather than faith-based spiritual and/or numerical growth, are very much in evidence today.

The solution seems to lie in how we can assist churches to accept who they are as parts of the Body of Christ with responsibilities in today's world. Only then can they change from a self-image of "saving themselves," and operating from this image, to "giving themselves" through mission as their reason for being, and living according to this image. For some churches, their sense of mission may be discovering how to be a more faithful community of God's people. It is true that there are small membership churches whose capacity, alone, to impact the world is nominal. But, if they could experience a positive and joyful sense of community which includes at least some "outsiders" from other churches and the larger Church, they would experience a major breakthrough in terms of meaning and of being the Church. In Arkansas, we find in our small membership churches a cross-

section of people who, though fewer in number, have the same hurts, the same sophistication, the same capacity for leadership, the same need to be involved in creative ministry within their own settings, and the same need for exposure to the world as is true for members of larger churches. We do not need to fault small membership churches just because they do not grow. We do need to urge them to be faithful communities of God's people and to be responsive to the immediate and larger communities where they are located. Some will grow numerically in response to their faithfulness. All must grow in their spiritual lives.

QUESTIONS FOR THE LARGER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Let us look now at a number of agenda items which relate to the proclaiming and nurturing aspects of ministry, to churches of all sizes, to communities of various types, and to outreach for mission. It is my feeling that this agenda, contained in the context of the twelve questions which follow, should be given serious consideration by the people called United Methodists.

1. Will our Church foster a style of church life that collaborates and cooperates to the end that the ministry of each of our churches, wherever it is carried out, shall have vitality and meaning within faithful relationships to Christ?
2. Do we will to replace the image of day-to-day existence held by many of our churches with an image of worth and purpose? As I go out among the churches of Arkansas, especially to those of borderline existence, I ask myself about some particular church, "How much sense of worth or purpose do the children here pick up about the Christian faith as a result of being part of this congregation? Is the church alive and dynamic for them, or is it something that is hanging on by a thread?" In too many cases, the answer is a negative one. The question is, "Does our commitment as a denomination intend to change this?"

3. As a connectional system which we use to good advantage in collecting apportionments for the larger Church, are we willing for our local churches also to operate connectionally with other churches within their local area so that together they can become a newly created people with an enlarged sense of mission?
4. Are we fostering a sense of corporate concern among our churches for the well-being of each other? To state it differently, "Are we willing to shift from seeing neighboring churches and pastors as competitors to seeing them as collaborators in mission and ministry?"
5. Will we design leadership training that can help congregations understand what it means to care for one another, to assist one another, and to sustain one another as enlarged communities of faith?
6. In our way of "doing Church," are we willing to change the image of what it means to be a "successful" church or a "successful" pastor? While members and dollars for the local and larger Church are necessary, the major indication of a successful church not only should be how members provide for each others' nurture and worship needs but also how they respond to spiritual and human needs of persons and groups in their own communities and throughout the world.
7. Will we be willing to reclaim a work ethic in ministry which contains a sense of achievement and also incarnates servanthood? Will we incorporate into our expectations not just statistical measurements but standards of appraisal that take into account the evidence of intentional leadership that contends with such hard questions as: "What do we want to look like in the future? What do we want to change? What will we look like when we are changed? What will the image of change require?" Such expressions of intention need to become part of the total ministry of pastors and laity.
8. Will we train pastors in ways that will instill the desire to team up so as to reflect the living and present Christ within a geographical area? Far too many of our present pastors, and even entering pastors from the seminaries, are not prepared to appreciate the concept that all the churches within an area are The Church there, nor are they equipped to work in cooperation with other pastors and professionals to the benefit of the churches and The Church there.

9. Will we foster skills in the "ministry of relationships" so that the "works of ministry" will follow rather than precede relationships? The upbuilding of covenantal relationships within congregations must be uppermost. Loyalty to tasks must not precede God/human-oriented relationships. We must remember that the tasks and methods by which covenant is sought are to be servant-oriented and that tasks and methods must never become the master. Often times in church planning, one observes that goals are more task-oriented than person or congregation-oriented. Another way to ask this question is to say: "Will we be flexible enough to allow structure to be the result, not the forerunner, of purpose, task and relationships?" These concerns should be borne in mind as we move toward implementation of cooperative parishes among our people.
10. Are we willing to design a framework of professional ministry that maximizes the skills of committed pastors who may not be able to complete their training by the highest standards? It is not suggested here that we diminish ministerial standards, but that we incorporate the element of flexibility so as to maximize the skills of pastors who become available in the later years of life and who are needed for service in situations which will benefit from their labors.
11. Are we prepared to be a Church that journeys not only toward what is known but also toward what is unknown? Are we prepared to act on the biblical admonition that we are called to a future that already contains God, and that God is beckoning us to join it? Do we really believe that it is intended that God's people shall not be victimized by the future, but that they shall shape it so that oppression, hunger and injustice shall be displaced by righteousness, true compassion and human dignity?
12. Are we willing to proclaim the good news to small membership churches that numerical or financial weakness is not meant to be endured, but that it is meant to be replaced by the strength that proceeds from faith based in cooperative action with other congregations?

CONCLUSION

I recognize that the implications of these twelve questions constitute a tough agenda. But, it is an increasingly tough world for many of our churches, not only to care for their economic and pastoral leadership needs but from the point of view of their ministry and mission. It also is a world filled with opportunity for our Church, a Church with resources and a connectional polity through which our churches can serve members and communities from a position of strength rather than weakness. To cope with these implications means that we must seize this moment of time...a gift to us...and shape it to reflect God's presence who even now is busy creating with us. The United Methodist Rural Fellowship has a responsibility in helping this to happen.

An old Arkansas saying sums it up: "When you are dancing with a bear, you don't get tired and sit down. You wait till the bear gets tired. Then you sit down." In the United Methodist Rural Fellowship we are engaged in an opportunity that we must not relinquish. Though tired, we must not succumb. The situation will tolerate neither our neglect nor our lack of interest.

It is said that in President Kennedy's library, following the assassination, someone found a book by Ralph Waldo Emerson which was open and marked. This is the passage:

If there is any period one would desire to be born in, is it not the age of Revolution, when the old and the new stand side by side and admit of being compared; when the historic glories of the old can be compensated by the rich possibilities of the new era? This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it.

I ask for God's guidance so that we can truly know that this is a good time for the United Methodist Rural Fellowship. Further, I ask that we shall know what to do with the gift of these days as we urge the churches and The Church to be faithful in ministry and mission. And, last, I want to say very clearly that cooperative parish development and small membership churches now are and will continue to be important to the accomplishment of our Church's ministry and mission.

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